Ecology and ethics: relation of religious belief to ecological practice in the Biblical tradition

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The Bible, without which Western civilization is inexplicable, has powerful ecological teachings that support an ecological worldview. While these teachings are not widely practised in our time, continuing degradation of ecological systems by humanity requires their re-examination by ecologists and the church. Such re-examination can help develop the mutual understanding necessary for making ethical ecological judgements and putting these teachings into practice in an appropriate manner. Among these teachings are the expectation that people will serve and keep the Creation (earthkeeping principle), that creatures and ecosystems not be relentlessly pressed (sabbath principle), that provisions must be made for the flourishing of the biosphere (fruitfulness principle), that the Earth be filled with biologically diverse and abundant life (fulfilment principle), that pressing the biosphere's absolute limits must be avoided (buffer principle), that people should seek contentment and not selfish gain (contentment principle), that people should seek biospheric integrity rather than self-interest (priority principle) and that people should not fail to act on what they know is right (praxis principle). Ecologists need to recognize and respect these and other biblical ecological teachings and be ready to assist churches in their care and keeping of Creation. And churches must join ecologists in the work of assuring the continued integrity of the biosphere.

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Practical politics

In 1972 I ran for political office in my Town of Dunn – a community just south of the capital city of Madison, Wisconsin. Several citizens decided to come to grips with rampant urbanization of rural land and natural ecosystems in our community of 4000 people. Housing developments had begun to emerge here and there across our 34.5 square miles; agriculture was threatened and so too were our wetlands, lakes and streams. Our decision to replace our local government brought a new Town Board, and a subsequent 2-year moratorium on all land division gave us the peace to conduct an inventory of everything natural and human-made within our borders. Our inventory was extensive, covering the various ecosystems, biodiversity, agriculture, and human community past and present. While it was extensive, it was not complete, and we all came to realise it never could be. Scientific and ecological description provided the data for our implementing a land stewardship plan and codifying it into law in the late 1970s. Despite ongoing skirmishes with those who would destroy this land and its life for immediate personal gain, we now have gained – and hold together – our town with ecological and social integrity. We stand in contrast to communities around us, not merely because of the scientific and ecological knowledge we have gained about our place, but because we decided to act on that knowledge for the benefit of the land and its life. A land ethic has been instilled within us, and we have dedicated our lives to it and its defense. It is an ethic now published in the
landscape. It is published in the form of vital and intact ecosystems, restored wetlands, non-structural flood controls, roadsides replanted to prairie, vibrant human community, and much more. Of all Dunn’s publications in land and life, perhaps none is more dramatic than its citizens’ recent decision to add to its only burial ground – a site unused since the late 1800s. The townspeople have put together the science of their community, they have acted upon it and pursue it with fervour, and they are determined not only to live here but also to be buried in what has become their native place. The people of Dunn have come to know their place and they have come to cherish it.

Max Planck in his essay, *On Religion and Science* (1937), maintained that: ‘Man needs science in order to know; religion in order to act’. Do we in the Town of Dunn act religiously? Planck would suggest we do. He observed that:

> our decisions, made by our will, cannot afford to wait until we gain complete knowledge or become omniscient. We stand in the stream of life, surrounded by a multitude of demands and needs. We must often make quick decisions or immediately implement certain plans…

and brought him to say, ‘There is no better way to achieve a proper understanding of these remarks than to make the sustained effort to understand more deeply the nature and function of science on the one hand and of religion on the other.’

This, of course, has gotten me to think about the meaning and roles of science, ethics, and religion. Particularly intriguing to me is that Planck saw both religion and science confronting the same struggle – ‘a constant, continuing and unrelenting struggle against skepticism and dogmatism, against disbelief and superstition.’ What is the role of science and ecological knowledge? What is the role of ethics and of religion?

Planck observed that ‘Beliefs about the universe can as little take the place of knowledge and skills as the solution of ethical problems can be achieved through pure intellectual knowledge.’ Here he reflects our experience in the Town of Dunn. The Dunn experience and Planck’s reference to ethics brings us to an important discovery: our environmental problems are *ethical* problems. Contrary to what our legal and technical approaches to environmental problems may have implied about their sufficiency, legal and technical solutions are not adequate. Laws can and are circumvented and techniques inadequately applied. Without a supportive ethics we may find ourselves looking for ‘loopholes to get around the intent of the law’, proposing ‘mitigations for destructive actions’, and developing ‘rationales for non-compliance’. Planck and our recent experience help us to come to realize that we are deficient in practical ethics. Meeting this deficiency in practical ethics, with deep belief and fervour, is the behaviour we observe in the Town of Dunn.

Among those who recognized modern environmental problems as ethical problems are ecologists and environmental scientists. Ecologists have frequently treated land degradation and destruction not merely as things to describe but as situations calling forth an ethical response:

More than any other single segment of general public today – certainly more than government leaders, lawyers, philosophers, and educators – more, even than most mainline preachers, it is the scientists who are telling us that our world is in critical shape and that the human element is chiefly to blame for it. In fact, there has been a conspicuous about-face in the scientific community within the past two or three decades (Hall, 1986).

Thus, our recent discovery and conviction is this: technical and legal approaches are not sufficient in themselves; they must be joined by ethics. And not only ethics, but ethics put